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ABSTRACT

Adults must be willing to accept attitudes of criticism and rebellion as serious and valuable components of children's literature, but they should also expect a good children's book to make some sort of moral evaluation of those attitudes. For example, while one may respect the candor with which "Hansel and Gretel" depicts the struggle of children against adults, one must also question its indulgence in moral over-simplification. The wicked witch or evil stepmother, as the incarnation of all those aspects of the mother that the child finds threatening, is a figure of absolute evil, utterly devoid of all human goodness. Stevenson in "Treasure Island" permits the supreme act of rebellion against adult aggression to occur only as a mechanical act, not as one deliberately and rationally chosen by the child. J. M. Barrie, on the other hand, in "Peter Pan" makes a moral judgment about Peter Pan's behavior. Since Peter refuses to leave the island--a paradise of childhood--he cannot find a heart; and to the extent that Peter fails to find a heart, the novel judges his rebellion a failure. One should have reservations about endorsing the moral implications of any work that encourages children to think in terms of absolute good and evil to the detriment of such qualities as sympathy and compassion. Literature should be judged not only by the complexity and sophistication with which it presents moral issues, but also by its display of humanity. (HOD)

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"Terrible Thoughts": The Instinct of Revolt in Children's Literature

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"'But do we not all play, in our minds, with terrible thoughts which we would never dare to put into action? Could we live without some hidden instincts of revolt, of some protest against our fate in life, however enviable it may seem to those who do not have to bear it?'"

--Robertson Davies, World of Wonders

"Children," said Oscar Wilde, "begin by loving their parents. Then they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them." Now, many people know Wilde only as a wit and a cynic--popularity has a way of being its own curse. Others regard him as a brilliant case of arrested development. But a few prize him because, as this remark demonstrates, he had a visitor's eye for the smugness of his contemporaries--and the courage to challenge that smugness. Whatever our own thoughts on child-rearing, one can easily guess the response of a Victorian paterfamilias to offspring injudicious enough to forgive him in his hearing. Of course, our guess would be based, in large measure, not upon our own probable response in such a situation, but upon our knowledge of the literature of the time. Consider, for example, the last stanza of "My Mother," one of the best-known poems of one of the most popular books of children's verse in the nineteenth century, Ann Taylor's Original Poems for Infant Minds (1804-05):

For God, who lives above the skies,
Would look with vengeance in His eyes
If I should ever dare despise
my Mother.[1]

This poem is a splendid expression of the nineteenth century's dominant view of the relationship between the generations. It fearlessly assumes that, in the cosmic scheme of things arranged by Divine Providence, the child has no right to any feelings of hostility against his mother, and that any such feelings should inspire fear and guilt in right-minded children.

Alas! the Super-ego has fallen on hard times, and, while we may not believe that the fear of their children which many modern parents endure is preferable to Ann Taylor's smugness, we cannot deny that childhood has found its tongue since Ms Taylor's day. For better or for worse, we have learned that many children whom we now believe to be right-minded do indeed have such feelings, and often experience fear and guilt in connection with them. Today we are impatient with such works as Taylor's because their definition of the child is so tendentious and partial. The modern trend is to favour the Romantic view of the child as a being valuable not because he is moral, or obedient, or a potential adult, but because he is unique. Criticism today prizes most highly that literature which best reveals this uniqueness, and which approaches the child as that inspired egomaniac, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, approached himself, saying: "I know my heart . . . . I am not made like any of those I have seen; I dare to believe that I am not like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different."[2]

I suggest that the task of the modern critic is somehow to accommodate the views of both Rousseau and Taylor. We must, with Rousseau, accept the child as he presents himself to us, and not reserve our approval only for those works which present an idealized or comfortable view of children. Among other things, this means that we must be willing to accept attitudes of criticism and rebellion in children's literature as serious and valuable components of that literature. Ann Taylor reminds us that it is also part of our duty as critics to make a moral judgment of this rebellion, knowing that we shall be judged in our judgment as she is in hers. For purposes of illustration, I wish to examine three works in which adults meet their deaths at the hands of children, and see what conclusions can be drawn from the way the struggle between child and adult is handled.

Let us begin with one of the most celebrated collections of blood and gore ever to pass the threshold of the nursery, the Household Tales of the brothers Grimm. Generations of children have battened on these stories, in which astonishing numbers of adults dance themselves to death in red-hot shoes, or perish roasted alive in ovens, are torn to pieces by savage beasts, have their eyes plucked out by obliging birds, or come to one of a vast number of equally ingenious and gratifying bad ends. While we may value these tales, especially in the context of other nineteenth-century children's literature, because they portray the struggle of children against adults--the hidden instinct of revolt--so frankly, we also realise that the moral vision informing these tales is not always satisfactory. To see why this is so, let us probe the moral dimension of this struggle in one of the best-known of the Household Tales, "Hansel and Grethel."

We all know the plot of the story. The family "had very little to bite and to sup, and once, when there was great dearth in the land, the man could not even gain the daily bread."[3] What will not escape the astute listener, though, is the fact that the children are the obvious first victims in the struggle for existence. Their step-mother forces their kind but inept father to abandon the children in the forest before they all starve. The children wander until they arrive at the witch's house, where they "felt very frightened"--an understandable reaction considering their recent experience with women. But the witch takes pains to make herself appear an ideal mother, giving them everything their natural mother denied them:

> 'Ah, my dear children, how come you here? You must come indoors and stay with me, you will be no trouble.'
> So she took them each by the hand, and led them into her little house. And there they found a good meal laid out, of milk and pancakes, with sugar, apples, and nuts. After that, she showed them two little white beds, and Hansel and Grethel laid themselves down on them, and thought they were in heaven.

However it is not only her assumption of the maternal role which connects the witch with the children's mother; a more suggestive parallel is found in her intention to devour the children:

> The old woman, although her behaviour was so kind, was a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and had built the little house on purpose to entice them. When they were once inside, she used to kill them, cook them, and eat them, and then it was a feast-day with her. The witch's eyes were red, and she could not see very far, but she had a keen scent, like the beasts, and she knew very well when human creatures were near. . . .

What this tells us is that the witch is a ghoulish creature who does not merit consideration as a human being. She meets the end she obviously deserves when "Grethel gave her a push . . . and she shut the oven door upon her, and put up the bar. Oh how frightfully she howled! but Grethel ran away, and left the wicked witch to burn miserably" All right-minded children of course applaud Grethel's action; but justice must take into account that, though Grethel's action is necessary to save her brother, it is also an act of symbolic revenge upon their step-mother, the source of their torments. Is it mere coincidence that the death of the witch, the mother's alter ego, results in the death of their step-mother, sudden riches, and the happiness which the step-mother had made impossible? The children returned home, "rushed in at the door, and fell on their father's neck. The man had not had a quiet hour since he left his children in the wood, but the wife was dead. . . . Then was all care at an end, and they lived in great joy together."

Why is this story so disturbing? While we must respect the candour with which it depicts the struggle of children against adults, we must also surely question its indulgence in moral over-simplification. The wicked witch or evil step-mother, as the incarnation of all those aspects of the

mother that the child finds threatening, is a figure of absolute evil, utterly devoid of all human goodness.[4] Despite the persuasive arguments of Professor Bettelheim, we may well have reservations about endorsing the moral implications of any work which encourages children to think in terms of absolute good and evil, to the detriment of such qualities as sympathy and compassion, qualities without which no community can long endure.

In the nineteenth century, a child could find his feelings of hostility towards adults expressed in fairy tales of the sort collected by the Brothers Grimm, but such stories are essentially items of folklore. Until very recently indeed, most literature written expressly for children tended to hold serenely to the line taken by Ann Taylor. Even as promising a book as Treasure Island (1883), a book which its author gleefully described as being "as original as sin," a book which flaunts a one-legged murderer who keeps company with "a woman of colour" and who excapes scot-free--with our approval--at the book's close, fails to give a satisfying picture of the child as rebel. Jim Hawkins is, to be sure, rebellious, in a haphazard sort of way. When his father, too weak and sick a man to deal even with Billy Bones, dies, Jim is left to fill his shoes as man of the house. The novel promises to deal with, among other things, Jim's transition to this role, but Stevenson adroitly evades the more problematical aspects of such a metamorphosis.

We see this evasion most clearly in Jim's narrow escape from Israel Hands aboard the Hispaniola. As a result of his foolhardy attempt to recapture the schooner, Jim finds himself in the situation of many of the children in the Household Tales--locked in a life-or-death struggle with an adult who threatens him with overwhelming violence. The struggle with Hands is in many senses the climax of the novel; certainly it requires

Jim to focus all the wisdom and cunning he has acquired in his struggle to bear a man's part. He almost fails this crucial test of his ability to learn from his experience when he falls into smugness over the sailor's apparent capitulation:

> I was drinking in his words and smiling away, as conceited as a cock upon a wall, when, all in a breath, back went his right hand over his shoulder: Something sang like an arrow through the air; I felt a blow and then a sharp pang, and there I was pinned by the shoulder to the mast. In the horrid pain and surprise of the moment--I can scarce say it was by my own volition, and I am sure it was without a conscious aim--both my pistols went off, and both escaped out of my hands. They did not fall alone; with a choked cry the coxswain loosed his grasp upon the shrouds, and plunged head first into the water.

What is interesting about this passage, is that, in the critical moment of Jim's struggle against the violence of adults, Stevenson reduces his hero to a puppet of circumstances: "In the horrid pain and surprise of the moment--I can scarce say it was by my own volition, and I am sure it was without a conscious aim--both my pistols went off. . . ." That is, Stevenson does not allow Hawkins the ordeal--and the opportunity--of moral decision. Furthermore, Hands is a creature wholly evil, like the witch in "Hansel and Grethel"; killing him requires no complex moral choice. Stevenson permits the supreme act of rebellion against adult aggression to occur only as a mechanical act, not as one deliberately and rationally chosen by the child. Many have found such delicacy appealing, but, is it not remarkable that, in a novel which purports to concern itself with a boy's coming to maturity, Stevenson does not avail himself of the many opportunities presented in the confrontation of the boy and the sailor? It might be difficult to state more precisely the nature of Stevenson's moral evasion in this passage, but such an evasion does indeed seem to

have taken place.

The struggle between children and adults is perhaps nowhere better, nor more consciously studied, at least in the field of accepted "children's literature," than in J. M. Barrie's novel about a boy who never grows up, Peter Pan.[5] I particularly like Barrie's summation of children as "gay and innocent and heartless," "the most heartless things in the world," perhaps because it best describes the children I know. Deciding just what this heart is, and why Peter, the archetypal child, lacks one, is one of the more fruitful ways of approaching this novel.

In terms of the theme I have been pursuing, Peter is a child who makes an extreme response to the threats posed by the adult world. His rebellion is total: Peter chooses absolute war and absolute withdrawal, and refuses to grow up:

> 'I ran away the day I was born. . . . It was because I heard father and mother . . . talking about what I was to be when I became a man.' . . . 'I don't want ever to be a man,' he said with passion. 'I want always to be a little boy. . . . So I ran away. . . .'

The Neverland, in which Peter now lives, is a world which is, for Peter at least, out of time, and where all his fancies are gratified. The map of Neverland is "a map of a child's mind," and Peter's autonomy is absolute. There he wages an unending war of symbolic revenge against the adult world, as represented by Hook's crew and the Piccaninny tribesmen. We note that, when he brings the Darling children to Neverland, Peter's first action is to tell John: "'There's a pirate asleep in the pampas just beneath us. . . . if you like, we'll go down and kill him.!" And Peter's attitude is highly contagious; when Michael, the youngest of the Darling children, returns home and catches his first sight of his father, he "sizes up" Daddy in a most revealing way: "'He is not so big as the pirate I killed,' he said with

. . . frank disappointment." And, when the boys elect to return to the Mainland with Wendy, and disregard Peter's warning (once, when he had flown back, "'the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed'"), Peter

> was so full of wrath against grownups who, as usual, were spoiling everything, that . . . he breathed intentionally quick short breaths at the rate of about five to a second. He did this because there is a saying in the Neverland that, every time you breathe, a grown-up dies; and Peter was killing them off vindictively as fast as possible.

In short, Peter's rebellion is as sincere as open warfare can be. But does Barrie endorse this rebellion whole-heartedly? We know that Peter has rejected the world of time. He is "the only boy on the island who could neither write nor spell, not the smallest word. He was above all that sort of thing." By his own choice, Peter is a prehistoric creature. Since he is exempt from history, time and death are meaningless to him. He must lose everyone and everything he knows, but he need not remember the loss. For this reason, Peter conceives death only as "an awfully big adventure"; therefore he remembers nothing, not even Wendy.

To remember is, in this novel, to be an adult. The memories of the other children are somewhat fluid; Peter's alone is totally unreliable, and this is the source of his heartlessness. To Wendy, astonished that Peter does not remember Captain Hook, Peter can say grandly "I forget them after I kill them." But such insouciance grates when we meet it in other contexts, as in the Spartan epitaph "Mrs. Darling was now dead and forgotten." One might well bury a cocker spaniel with more ceremony. Exempt from time, Peter is likewise exempt from remorse; as his final meeting with Wendy demonstrates, to be without memory is to be without a heart. Since he can

never know death, Peter can never know what it is to be a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

Peter's heartlessness is a consequence of his rejection of the adult world, a world devoured by time. We sympathize with the adults in Barrie's novel--Mrs Darling, Hook, Wendy--because time takes everything from them, as it does from us, and so makes them at once unique and also like ourselves. Hook is, for this reason, something of a tragic antagonist in the novel. If Peter is the archetypal boy, Hook is the archetypal adult, for he is obsessed with time, as grotesquely symbolized by the alarm clock in the crocodile which pursues him to his death. Cursed with self-consciousness, and a knowledge of his failure to live up to his ideals, Hook is also obsessed with good form, the lost grace and innocence of childhood which Peter cannot help possessing. Hook is fallen man, the prisoner of that world of time which Peter shuns. Hook's insight does not make him good--Barrie is not writing <u>that</u> kind of fantasy--but it does make him a candidate for our sympathy in a way that Peter can never be so long as he remains heartless. One wants a heart, finally not in order to be an adult--what a paltry ambition that would be--but because one wants to be whole, to be complete. Barrie contends that it is only in the acceptance of time, and of loss, and of the risks of love, that a heart is to be found. As Barrie once observed in an introduction to R. M. Ballantyne's <u>The Coral Island</u>, "To be born is to be wrecked on an island." Since Peter refuses to leave the island--paradise of childhood, he cannot find a heart; and, to the extent that Peter fails to find a heart, the novel judges his rebellion a failure. <u>Peter Pan</u> is anything but the sentimental monument to childhood its adulators wish it to be. Barrie shows us Peter's rebellion--and does it magnificent justice--but he also insists on showing us the price the boy

must pay.

In examining attitudes to rebellion in these three works, I have been suggesting that we may judge literature by the complexity and sophistication with which it presents moral issues, and also by its display of that nebulous quality, humanity. We may value Peter Pan above the Household Tales or Treasure Island for its greater moral complexity, but such preferences should not blind us to the common question posed by these works: What will our attitude be to such expressions of rebellion, in or out of children's literature? If we value truth, we must accept as valuable that literature which reflects most accurately our sense of the complexities of human nature, including the complexities of our own violent and rebellious impulses. We are intimately concerned with the treatment of such impulses in literature for the same reason that in Shakespeare's The Tempest, Prospero is intimately concerned with the treatment of Caliban; because, as the magician says, "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (The Tempest, V, i, 275-76). We require a "good" children's book to attempt to depict children and their attitudes honestly. We also require it to make some sort of moral evaluation of those attitudes. A "good" children's book may examine, may judge, may even condemn--but it may not reject its subject. After all, we cannot reject, as inappropriate or forbidden to children, certain hostile feelings without rejecting a part of ourselves as adults. For we too have such feelings; we too are engaged in a mortal struggle in which undue power and advantage lie with our adversaries. Perhaps we cannot endorse the violence which informs Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy", but none of us, I hope, will deny a hearing to its pain, that pain that so many of us, somewhere, remember:

Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

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Notes

[1] Iona and Peter Opie, eds., The Oxford Book of Children's Verse (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 115. Some readers will know the revised ending, which Ms Taylor was finally prevailed upon to write in her eighty-fifth year:

> For could our Father in the skies
> Look down with pleased or loving eyes
> If ever I could dare despise
> my Mother?

[2] Jean Jacques Rousseau, Confessions, trans. L. G. Crocker (New York: 1957), p. 1.

[3] Lucy Crane, trans., Household Tales from the Collection of the Brothers Grimm (1886; rpt. New York: Dover, 1963), p. 85.

[4] The evil step-mother is frequently a practitioner of the black arts, as in "Snow White", and this is another link with the infernal kingdom. On the relationship of the witch and the step-mother, see Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (1976; rpt. New York: Knopf, 1977), passim, esp. pp. 169-72.

[5] Peter Pan (play), 1904; Peter and Wendy (novel), 1911.